DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 164 SO 015 782

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TITLE An Evaluation of Law-Related Education: Implications for Teaching.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium and the Bundeszentrale fur politische Bildung (Irsee, Bavaria, West Germany, June 18-22, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Behavior Change; *Delinquency Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; Human Resources; Instructional Improvement; Instructional Materials; Interprofessional Relationship; *Legal Education; Program Effectiveness; Prosocial Behavior; Teaching Methods; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Law Related Education

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on recommendations for improving and/or changing educational practice in order to prevent or reduce deviant behavior among juveniles. The recommendations are derived from a three-year national quantitative and qualitative evaluation of law-related education programs undertaken by the Social Science Education Consortium, Inc. and the Center for Action Research (Boulder, Colorado). Following a discussion about the positive relationship of law-related education and the prevention of juvenile delinquency, the paper focuses on six critical features that have been shown to produce positive improvements in behavior when incorporated into law-related education programs: (1) use of outside resource persons in the classroom, (2) use of teaching strategies that foster true interaction and joint work among students, (3) judicious selection and balance of illustrative cases, (4) provision of sufficient quantity and quality of instruction, (5) involvement of building administrators, and (6) availability and use by teachers of professional peer support. Specific suggestions for implementing these features are outlined under each of the above subheadings. The paper concludes that although good teaching practices by themselves can go far in achieving delinquency prevention objectives, law-related education as a subject has significant and favorable effects over and above the consequences of superior instruction. (LH)

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AN EVALUATION OF LAW-RELATED EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

by

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prepared as part of

A JOINT CONFERENCE

Sponsored by:

SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION CONSORTIUM, INC.
BUNDESZENTRALE FÜR POLITISCHE BILDUNG

June 18-22, 1984

SO 015 782

AN EVALUATION OF LAW-RELATED EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Introduction

This paper reports on recommendations for improving and/or changing educational practice in order to prevent or reduce deviant behavior among juveniles. The recommendations are derived from a three-year national quantitative and qualitative evaluation of law-related education programs undertaken by the Social Science Education Consortium, Inc., and the Center for Action Research. Findings from the fourth year of the study will be available in August, 1984. Preliminary examination of data indicate that the recommendations discussed here are supported.

None of what will be described means, of course, that what appears to make a difference in the United States can or would produce desirable outcomes for students in the Federal Republic. There is, first of all, the question of content. The study examined only law-related education. Are similar courses offered in the FRG? What is there duration? Are there curriculum materials of adequate quality that are readily available to teachers?

Second, one must consider the context of instruction. Do teachers have sufficient background to provide instruction in the law and legal issues? If not, are there in-service opportunities? Would law-related education courses be considered legitimate by adminstrators, teachers, parents, and students?

None of these issues are examined here. We would hope some of them might be considered in the course of discussion.

The Relationship of Law-Related Educaton and Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency

There are an array of delinquency prevention theories--control, strain, and labeling--that suggest that there are at least six behavior-related factors that must be affected if we are to prevent or reduce delinquency among young people. A seventh powerful factor--association with non-delinquent peers--seems to be indirectly associated with the first six and directly related to the use of several law-related education teaching strategies.

What do these research based theories have to do with those of us who toil in the garden of social studies? Or stated more simply, is there anything here that recommends itself to our attention? As social studies teachers, we certainly want students to know something, to be able to do something, and to feel one way or the other about something when they complete our courses of study. Some of us also want to prepare students who are willing to put the cognitive, skill, and affective components of instruction together in order to do something or participate.

If, however, we wish to provide instruction that also will reduce or prevent delinquency, it appears we must expand these traditional objectives to include those that will affect delinquency-producing behavior. First of all, we must want our students to attach to and admire adult positive role models in the society; to become so committed to conventional activities they hesitate to break rules; to be involved and invest time and energy in conventional activities; to believe that rules and laws have validity and are important in maintaining an orderly society; and to associate with non-delinquent peers. In addition, we must provide students with greater equality of opportunity for getting good grades and classroom rewards and attach positive rather then negative labels to them.

None of these objectives, of course, are antithetical to achieving traditional social studies objectives. On the contrary, there is considerable expirical evidence--and more is being surfaced each day--that objectives of this kind also have a salutory effect on the achievement of the more traditional ones. The question, then, becomes how well can law-related education (LRE) with a particular content focus and set of interactive strategies achieve the objectives that relate to delinquency prevention? We will look both at the strategies and recommended pedagogical techniques and the content.

In a very general sense, law-related education appears to be particularly well suited to favorably affecting all of the behavior-related factors described above. LRE, for example, provides opportunities for building attachment, not only to representatives of the school, but to law enforcement and justice system personnel as well. In teams of commitment, students in the evaluation study reported valuing LRE more highly than most other classes. Because the subject matter connects especially well to the world outside the school and engages students in a potentially significant learning experience, LRE appears to increase involvement in conventional activities. Because it conveys an understanding of the basis and necessity for rules and laws, LRE seems to create a foundation for heightened belief in the validity of social rules.

Law-related education strategies are designed in part to offer all students opportunities to participate actively and excel; a consequence is greater equality of opportunity and greater probability of positive labeling. Many of the strategies feature cooperative tasks that appear capable of affecting peer choices directly.

Unfortunately, although evaluation findings support these general propositions; they indicate as well that when law-related instruction does not incorporate several critical features, there

may be no measurable effect or even a worsening of students' behavior. This can occur in classes where students show gains in their knowledge about the law. In sum, it is only when certain features--(1) use of outside resourse persons in the classroom, (2) use of teaching strategies that foster true interaction and joint work among students, (3) judicious selection and balance of illustrative cases, (4) provision of sufficient quantity of instruction, (5) involvement of building administrators, and (6) availability and use by teachers of professional peer support--are incorporated into law-relatd education programs that we find positive, improvements in behavior.

Four of these features are related directly and specifically to classroom implementation. Two others are related to organization of the school. Each of these will be discussed below.

Use of Outside Resource Persons in the Classroom

Evaluation data indicate that appropriate use of visitors in LRE classes is more strongly associated with increased student attachment to teacher and school and with shifts from delinquent to nondelinquent peer associations than is any other classroom practice or event. These findings cannot be taken to mean that every resource person or every instructional approach will achieve these desirable objectives, however. Classroom observations indicate that in order for resource persons to be effective:

1. topics covered by outside resource persons must be relevant to the rest of the course and properly timed for a good fit with the sequence of material presented;

2. the principal mode of visitors' in-class activity should be interaction with the students;

3. visitors should present a balanced picture of the part of the system they know best, neither claiming infallibility nor unduly emphasizing "horror stories" (see "Selection and Balance" below);

4. visitors should receive advance preparation not only in fitting their content into the course as a whole, but in effective interactive teaching strategies--specifically, in techniques for reaching the whole class, not just a few particularly receptive students; and

5. before a visit by an outside resource person, students should receive preparation to maximize their thoughtful participation when the visitor is present (e.g., having each student come in with a list of questions for possible use on the day of the visit).

Use of Teaching Strategies that Foster True Interaction and Joint Work Among Students

Although LRE classrooms as a whole using group learning techniques produced slight negative associations with both belief in the validity of social rules and nondelinquent peer relations, observations of those classrooms and other research validate the power of group work. It apparently was not the strategy or set of stragegies that proved to be ineffective in reaching these dimensions. Rather it appears to be the inherent difficulty with implementing these strategies effectively.

For example, some teachers struggle when working with small groups. Many of the exercises observed during evaluation either were preceded by inadequate directions, were unsuited to the task

at hand, or simply consumed inordinate amounts of time. Moreover, few of the observed exercises involved true task interdependence, and none of them involved explicit reward interdependence.

Observers, consequently, have recommended that small-group work be used selectively and appropriately, where it will enhance learning, and not simply for its own sake. In addition, strategies other then small group work are built into the LRE curricula and can be employed to achieve active participation and student-to-student interaction. Role-playing and preparing for and conducting moot courts, mock trials and legislative hearings are notable examples of activities highly conducive to task and reward interdependence.

Yet another ideal opportunity for fostering student interaction occurs when dealing with controversial issues. Here again is an area in which many teachers feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Some "provide the correct answer." Some raise the level of abstraction of the issue to the point where it is no longer controversial. Fe prepare students by developing and enforcing procedural guidelines for rationally analyzing and discussing issues that are controversial or conflictual.

Judicious Selection and Presentation of Illustrative Cases Materials

The primary purpose of providing students with a balanced view of the judicial system is to foster among them a belief that laws are necessary and important for maintaining an orderly and predictable society. On the one hand, presenting the system as nightmarish appears to increase cynicism and negativism and reduces the probability that law will come to be viewed as a positive tool for maintaining social order. On the other hand,

when law and law enforcers are depicted as infallible, students not only discount the importance of what is being taught but also tend to doubt the credibility of the instructor.

The issue of balance often arises in connection with a visit from a resource person. Some resource persons, who have not been briefed properly by the teacher, will claim perfection for their part of the system. Others may spend entire class periods recounting horror stories, leaving no time to bring the issues to closure by discussing available legal remedies.

The most successful presentations of legal cases occur when (1) the issue selected for discussion generates stong initial differences of opinion among students, (2) the teacher and/or visitor, through preparation and rehearsal, comes to class able to anticipate the arguments and counterarguments that students are likely to voice, (3) students are required to back any view they express with reasons, (4) they are encouraged to respond to reasons voiced by other students, (5) where necessary, the teacher uses probing questions to help individual students recognize and confront inconsistencies in their reasoning, and (6) the teacher enriches the issue-specific discussion with a wider view of the system and the balance that must be struck in it.

Provision of Sufficient Quantity and Quality of Instruction

The question of how much LRE instruction is necessary in order to achieve optimal impact in terms of behavior change is still open to speculation. Evaluation findings do suggest that while weekly or biweekly instruction may increase knowledge, it will not change other behaviors. At a minimum, there must be at least a semester of instruction or careful integration of LRE content and strategies into year-long courses.

Three aspects related to quality of instruction appear to correlate well with student attachment to teachers and the school, commitment, improvement in behavior, and increases in knowledge gains. These are: (1) checking for practice and understanding, (2) stating objectives and establishing a mental set, and (3) depth and density of coverage.

Effective teachers can be neither perfunctory in checking student progress nor can they ask only a few of the students if they are having problems or have questions. Opportunities for applying knowledge and skills should also be incorporated into every lesson.

Teachers typically know what learning outcomes they expect to achieve on any given day. A much less typical behavior is sharing this information with students. Teachers do rather well at giving adequate directions for accomplishing classroom tasks, however.

Unfortunately, while it appears better to inform students of what they are expected to do without letting them understand why, only giving directions has no association with attachment to teachers and a slight negative association with improvements in students' belief in the validity of rules. Thus, it appears that it is necessary to tell students: (1) what they are going to learn, (2) why they are going to learn it, and (3) how what they are going to learn fits into the overall topic being presented.

The degree of depth and density accorded classroom topics is associated with attachment and improved behavior. Covering a law-related topic in depth is likely to require (1) greater technical knowledge of the law, (2) skills in managing ambiguity and controversy, and (3) skills in organizing difficult material, all factors that are difficult for teachers who have not had an opportunity for systematic study of legal issues nor much contact

with LRE strategies. At the same time, it is necessary for teachers to be aware that too much depth and detail can be confusing, frustrating, and boring for students.

The implications of all of this are two-fold. For teachers, it is useful to participate in inservice programs or other self study. For school districts, it is helpful if such inservice opportunities are made available.

Involvement of Building Administrators

The most effective LRE classes appear to be located in schools where building administrators actively participate in providing classroom resources, facilitating field trips, and dealing with concerns about LRE classes voiced by other teachers or members of the community. Administrators are also important in reducing the gap that can exist between school governance policies and the ideas about justice and procedural due process that may be generated in the LRE class.

Informed administrators are aware, as well, of the problems inherent in using LRE classes as "dumping grounds " for troublesome students. If an overall objective is the reduction of delinquency, putting troublemakers together militates against the establishment of positive peer relationships. Thus, although administrators are often very busy and often overcommitted, it is advisable to include them in awareness conferences, provide them with descriptive/explanatory documents, and involve them in instructional decisions.

Availability and Use by Teachers of Professional Peer Support

The evidence suggests that teachers who are called upon to be innovative in the midst of others pursuing a more conventional course, are likely to require uncommon levels of support from

their peers. This support can be developed by providing training to teams of teachers from the same building, by arranging for classroom visits from a supportive district social studies supervisor or other curriculum administrator, or by scheduling ongoing follow-up sessions with state or local LRE project staff.

When more than one teacher in the same building is trained, opportunities arise for joint lesson planning, cooperative use of visits from resource persons and trips off school grounds, and classroom observation and provision of feedback. A team may also be more likely than a single teacher to be able to generate support for LRE from other teachers and administrators. In addition, the team gives the program more stability; the departure of one teacher via transfer or retirement does not leave a school without a trained LRE instructor.

Where teams cannot be developed, however, district-wide seminars and social functions for all LRE teachers can provide necessary peer support, reducing feelings of isolation and strengthening teachers' commitments to LRE's innovative methods and substance.

Conclusions

In some regard, the evaluation findings support the premise that improved instructional techniques by themselves can go far in achieving delinquency prevention objectives. A math teacher, a science teacher, a business teacher willing to adhere to the foregoing recommendations could well have an impact on students' behavior.

Does this mean that instruction about the law is not that important? NO.

Although good teaching practices contributed to the success of the classes that were assessed, it was also discovered that law-related education as a subject has significant favorable effects over and above the consequences of superior instruction. In three traditional civics classes used for comparison, there was deliberate use throughout the semester of the same recommended teaching strategies as were used in the three law-related education classes taught at the same school. Compared with those in the civics classes, students who received law-related education showed a significant reduction in their rate of delinquent behavior and significant improvement in most of the other outcomes measured.